

PERSIAN-MESOPOTAMIAN RELATIONS:

Religious and Territorial Fault Lines from the 16th Century to 1975

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The United States' involvement in Iraq and challenges from Iran compel a greater understanding of the complexities of Iraqi as well as Iranian military and political history. We can no longer ignore the patterns of Iranian and Iraqi history which stretch for centuries. It is vital that America's war colleges delve into obscure disputes such as those between the Ottomans and Safavid Persians. Iraq, known before the 20th century as Mesopotamia, has always been the scene of superpower struggles for centuries: the Greeks versus the Lakhmids, the Romans versus the Parthians (able horsemen, the Parthian could fire a bow while mounted, giving the term Parthian and now parting shot). The Sassanid Persians fought in Iraq first against Christian Byzantium and then the Arabs unified by Islam. Then Iraq would be the stage for rivalries between the Ottomans and the Safavid Persians. The Cold War (1945-1991) engulfed three monarchs of Hashemite Iraq (Kings Faisal I, Ghazi I, and Faisal II) and the Shah of Iran. Fears of Iranian expansion pitted the Republic of Iraq against the Shah, and those fears were amplified with the successful coup that brought the Islamic Republic of Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini. Fears now include not only the expansion of Iran, but the export of revolutionary and radical Shiite political doctrines.

Despite Iraq being the scene of so much historical violence from 1554 to 1975, there would be 10 major agreements signed between Iraq (or Mesopotamia) and Iran (or Persia). Nabil Khalifah, a then-recently graduated Arab student of Islamic civilization, wrote two books, one on Lebanese historical culture and the second on Saudi petroleum politics. His third book — the subject of this review essay — was published in 1983 and was part of his undergraduate thesis. It is a historical analysis of these 10 agreements between Iraq and Iran. Khalifah attempted to address the central issues that have resulted in conflict between these two regional powers from 1554 to 1975. He published his work under the title *Ruyah Jadeedah lil Harb al-Iraqiyah al-Farisiyah (A New Assessment of the Iraq-Iran War)*. It is important to pause and note that this Arabic book was published three years into the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1989). The book was self-published in Beirut and can be found through inter-library loan by citing Library of Congress call number 84962304.



Figure 1 — Map created between 1934 and 1939

Works by Arab intellectuals and graduate theses of military significance that are printed into books are important to analyze. They offer American military planners a method to better understand the region from the vantage and culture of those living, writing and reflecting on conflicts within the Middle East. It is not important to agree or disagree with a point of view, but to learn, study and become acclimated to the perceptions, as well as the overt and covert hostilities between Iran and Iraq over the centuries. This review of Khalifah's work will not highlight his views on all 10 treaties, but introduce readers to the main points of his book with a focus on the sources of conflict between Iran and Iraq from the 16th century to 1975. Once identified, these tensions can be monitored and managed, as we balance the complexities of political-military affairs in the Persian Gulf.

Religious Issues

A key guarantee for any Persian ruler, since Shiite Islam became the state religion in Persia (now Iran) under Shah Abbas I in 1508, was to secure unmolested access to Shiite holy sites under Sunni control such as Karbala and Najaf in Iraq and Mecca and Medina in Arabia. This would be the central focus of the Amasia Treaty of 1554. The treaty was negotiated to stop the harassment of Shiite pilgrims by Ottoman government functionaries, villagers and Sunni tribes. Shiite pilgrims were robbed of their valuables on their way to Karbala from Persia or in northern Arabia as they

made their way to Mecca.

The Nadir Shah Treaty of 1746 focused on getting Ottomans to acknowledge their responsibility for the concept of *aman* (safe-passage or safety and security) of guests visiting Ottoman domains as pilgrims. The focus of the treaties of 1554 and 1746 were geographically centered on access to Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. The Ottomans captured Mesopotamia gradually from 1534 and wrested the entire region from Persia by 1555. The Ottomans (a Sunni power) now controlled the holy sites of both Shiites and Sunni Muslims to include Mecca and Medina in Arabia as well as Karbala and Najaf in Mesopotamia. The Ottoman capture of Shiite holy shrines in Iraq from Persia necessitated a renegotiation of the treaty of 1554 and renewed hostilities between Persia and the Ottomans. Sunni dominance of Shiite holy sanctuaries in Iraq would continue from 1555 until the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

The capture of Karbala in 1556 so outraged the Shiite community that skirmishes broke out between Persian and Ottoman forces. By the 19th century the Ottomans and Persians massed large formations, a stand-off that required the intervention of Britain and Russia, who organized the Erzurum Talks. These talks resulted in two treaties in 1823 and 1847. The second Erzurum Talks began in 1843, but it took four years for an agreement to be reached between Persia and the Ottomans on the status of the holy sites and the status of the Shiite *Hawza* (clerical cluster) in present-day Iraq. Persian demands during the second Erzurum Talks included:

- Protection of Shia tradesmen and pilgrims within Ottoman domains;
- Abolishment of discriminatory practices against Shiites in Ottoman law courts;
- The right to establish Shiite mosques in Ottoman domains;
- Security to worship in Medina and Mecca in Arabia and Najaf and Karbala in Iraq; and
- Ease restrictions on rights to bury Shia in or near holy shrines, an imposition placed in the 19th century under the pretext of lack of space.

Persia's military incursions and harassment of Ottoman-controlled Basra as

well as Mosul were designed to force a reaction — recognition and respect for Shiism. In reality, both the Ottomans and Persians fanned the flames of sectarianism. Complicating Shiite rights in Sunni Ottoman dominions were the *Kaab* tribe who left the central Arabian region of the Najd and settled in what would be eventually named Arabistan (land of the Arabs). These Sunni minorities were discriminated against in Shiite-dominated Persia.

The Strategic Port of Muhammara

The Port of Muhammara (now Khorramshahr) located on the lip of the *Shatt al-Arab* waterway fell in the region of Arabistan. Tribal histories in this region matter, and this port was established by Ghaith ibn Kaab, of the *Kaab* tribe, likely in the 10th century. This port would evolve and expand to the modern ports of Umm Qasr and Abadan combined. The strategic importance of the Port of Muhammara would be magnified when the Mamelukes of Egypt fought a titanic struggle against the Muslim Mongols over control of the Levant in the 13th century. This diverted trade to the Persian Gulf, making the Port of Muhammara a valuable asset. The port would be an autonomous region ruled by the *Kaab* Tribe, and there were no organized or enforced tariffs. The Port of Muhammara quickly evolved into an open port for Arabs, Turks, Persians and Europeans, with the *Kaab* tribe sandwiched between the great powers of Persia and the Ottomans.

In Ottoman times, higher tariffs were levied on British goods, and the autonomous tribal confederacy of Muhammara exploited this by ignoring the Ottoman decree. In the expansion of the port during the late 19th century, the name *Khuramshahr/Muhammara* was applied to this trade zone. It became a vital strategic asset bringing in goods from the Persian Gulf and into Persia, Mesopotamia and the southern Levant. The *Kaab* tribe now led the tribal confederation of Muhammara, and its control of the port was encouraged by Britain to declare independence from Ottoman suzerainty. The Sunni *Kaab* Tribe saw in this the ability to maintain autonomy, by eliciting a new power (Great Britain) in its survival against the Ottomans and Persians. This was perhaps the earliest instance of the British providing protection

for the Arab sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf, and what would evolve into the Trucial Coast. In World War I, the British would use their relationship with the Sheikh of Muhammara to flow British Expeditionary Forces into the Port of Muhammara to protect Persian oil fields and the refinery in Abadan, and open a military campaign against Germany's ally Ottoman Turkey.

Ottoman and Persian Regional Jealousies

The book details the subconscious and conscious jealousies between Persia and the Ottomans that would carry over well into present day. We have already highlighted that Iraq was a nation that possessed Shiite holy places that Persia did not have. In addition, Iraq boasted larger cities than Persia and had more cultivatable marsh and flatlands versus the mountains of Persia. From the Persian perspective, all trade, development, agriculture and holy sites seemed to be going towards Mesopotamia. Trade was of great interest throughout the region's history, and the book highlights the Mesopotamian saying, "*The Persian makes pilgrimage to trade and trades to make pilgrimage.*" This adage captures in a few words the importance of unimpeded access of Shiite Persians into Iraq and then onto Arabia. The author highlights the following issues from studying the multiple agreements reached and broken from 1554 to 1975:

* The 1746 Nadir Shah Agreement has as part of its components Ottoman taxation, an issue resolved when an agreement was struck in which Persians would not be taxed unless they earn a profit or engage in trade within Mesopotamia.

* In 1823, it was agreed that a one-time tax of four percent be levied per visit on Shiites from Persia visiting Mesopotamia.

* There were a bevy of tariffs on Persian goods, and then in 1843 there was a cancellation of all tariffs and taxes except the four-percent tax. Trade equality between Ottoman Sunni and Persian Shiites was a matter of discussion.

The underlying Persian tension was that the Ottomans controlled the vital transportation links for pilgrimage and trade. Iraq also enjoyed waterways, rivers, and flatlands that made transportation much easier for those pilgrims and tradesman.

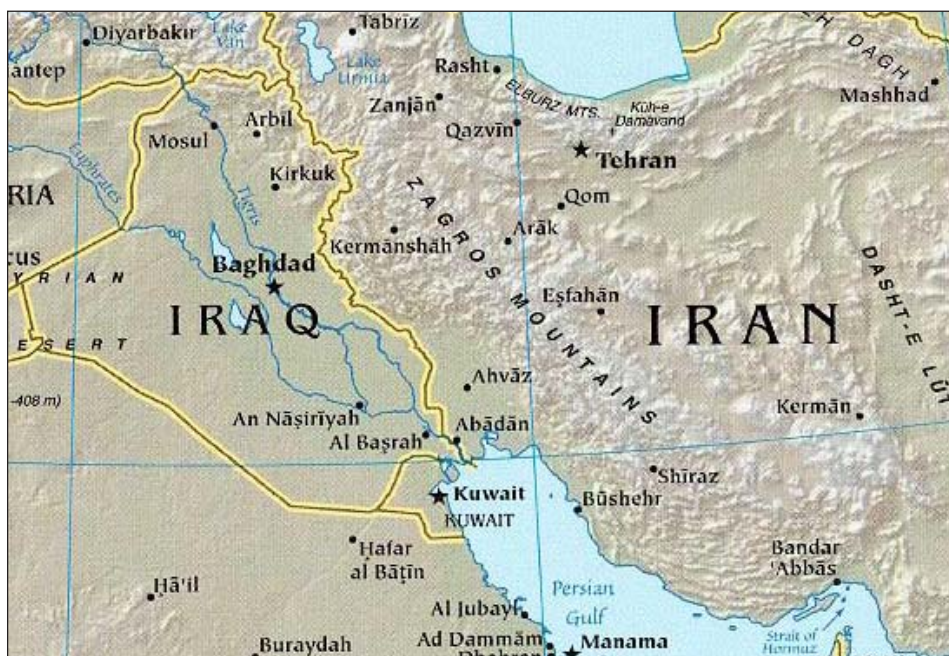


Figure 2 — Present Day Map of Area

Persia by 1843, sought to assert control of those routes through negotiation, a condition that would not last, as negotiations were only viewed as a temporary truce with the Ottomans. Many in the west failed to realize that the agreements and negotiations in the region were merely another form of warfare.

Geographic Border Flashpoints

American military planners should also study the three strategic geographic regions that have been contested between Iraq and Iran. These geographic regions were among the agenda items between Sunni and Shiite regional powers from Ottoman times to Saddam Hussein. The book defines these geographic flashpoints as:

(I) Suleimaniyah in the north: The Persian side is mountainous, and Persia has guarded Iraqi access into Iran itself and Turkey. This is why the Kurds would be pawns in the power struggle over dominance of mountain passes between Persian Shiite and Arab Sunni powers.

(II) The Zehab region in the center: This offered a direct route into Iran from central Iraq and vice versa.

(III) Muhammara and Ahwaz region of the Shatt al-Arab waterway in the South: This provided access to the Persian Gulf, and various rivers and tributaries. It was a flashpoint of warfare for centuries, to include the last major conflict, the Iran-Iraq War

(1980-1989). In Operation Iraqi Freedom, one key objective was the quick control of the Iraqi port of Umm Qasr, which allowed a logistical beachhead to be established.

Border Tensions in the 19th and 20th Centuries

The 1847 Second Treaty of Erzurum drew the borders between Persia and Ottoman Iraq under the auspices of Britain and Russia. In addition, the borders agreed to in this treaty have remained relatively intact to this day. The reason every agreement between Persia and Mesopotamia never endured was because although these agreements were on paper, the intention for peace and settlement was never present and could only be described as a cold peace. This cold peace between the Ottomans and Persians involved inciting Kurdish and Sunni insurgencies in Persia and Shiite agitation in Ottoman Mesopotamian provinces. To demonstrate the sensitivity of even a few kilometers between Persia and Iraq, the book highlights this case. In 1911, the Shatt al-Arab Waterway line of demarcation moved 7 3/4 kilometers from the center through negotiations, and in 1937 it moved 7 3/4 kilometers of the *Thalweg* (Water Demarcation) Line into the Iranian side of the coast towards Abadan. The reason for the breakdown and tactical duels over the Shatt al-Arab was that the Persians used the Shatt al-Arab waterway without



Figure 3 — Close up of port areas

giving Iraq land in Qasr Shireen that the Iraqis felt they were entitled to and negotiated for (although this is debatable) both in the Shah's time and in the time of Ayatollah Khomeini. In 1975, this line was again discussed and the Algiers Agreement redrew the line in favor of Iran. This explosive combination of centuries of jealousy and obsession of gaining minor advantage between Sunni and Shiite on the fault-line between Iraq and Iran was exacerbated when Shah Reza Pahlavi and Iran was transformed as one of two pillars of American security interests in the region, the second pillar being Saudi Arabia. Provided with American arms and equipment, Iran evolved into the fifth largest army in the world, and Iraq would be marginalized making the Baathists look towards the Warsaw Pact and Arab nationalism to counter America's favor of the Iranian regime.

It is important to pause and understand the lack of options thrust upon the United States, with the announcement of the withdrawal of British forces east of the Suez by 1971 (an announcement made in 1967). The Twin Pillar Policy, developed by the Nixon administration, was designed to have a Sunni and Shiite regional power police the region, but this disrupted the balance of power in the region, placing significant players like Egypt and Iraq at a disadvantage. Flush with modern weapons, Iran began to flex its military muscle in the Persian Gulf, taking physical control of the islands of Abu Musa, as well as the Greater and Lesser Tunbs from the United Arab Emirates. Iran made blustery statements

claiming Emirate of Bahrain and the Shatt al-Arab waterway as its territory. Saddam Hussein cancelled the 1975 Algiers Agreement in 1980, the Iraqi Baathists used the pretext of Iran not returning 150 square kilometers of Qasr Shireen, a negotiation point the Iraqis believed they had gained. This combined with the fear of the spread of Khomeinism and the Ayatollah's labeling of the Baathists as apostates as well as Iranian support of world Islamist Liberation movements led to a strategic decision by Iraq to pursue a more hostile policy against Teheran. But the new Islamist radical regime in Iran altered the dynamics of the region, with Iran marginalized by the United States and scaring the Arab world, Iraq found an opportunity to assert its dominance in the Persian Gulf region. In many ways Saddam had misread internal events within Iran and chose not to take a more covert option for dealing with fights between Ansar Khomeini, radicalist hardliners, and the Revolutionary Government of Iran. A covert approach of supporting factions within the Iranian Revolution would have been a better option for Iraq, than direct action, the choice Saddam made when he invaded Iran in 1980.

Saddam viewed Iranian command and control in the early months of the Iranian Revolution to be completely eroded and looked on as Iran purged its top generals for even a perceived loyalty to the Shah. Economically Iran's oil industry was in tatters, and the demonization of both the United States and USSR left Iran isolated. Saddam also saw the balkanization of Iran's minorities as the Kurds in the north and Arabs of Arabistan in the south began challenging the authority of the central government in Tehran. This was brought on by internal skirmishes as the Iranian revolution took on the trappings of an Islamist version of the Reign of Terror, except the terror was perpetrated by hardliners wanting to impose a fundamentalist Shiite regime upon all Iranians.

Under this instability within Iran, Saddam could have stimulated revolts among the Kurds and disgruntled minorities of Arabistan to the Southwest and Sunni Baluchistan in the southeast. Both are not without risks; tension between the Iranian-Pakistan borders would have diverted attention from the Soviet adventure in Afghanistan. Empowering the Kurds on either the Iranian, Iraqi, Turkish or Syrian borders was always a delicate gamble, as empowered autonomous Iranian Kurds could hypothetically foment insurgency in Iraqi Kurdistan. Instead Saddam chose to invade Iran, deluding himself that it would be a quick victory in which he would have the entire Shatt al-Arab waterway and Arabistan.

The Iran-Iraq War

The opening gambit of the Iran-Iraq War were Iraqi forces engaging in a dual thrust through Qasr Shireen and Sumar in the North and Arabistan in the South. Thirteen Iraqi divisions were allocated for the initial attack, with five crack divisions as the lead attack force to control the Arabistan/Ahwaz region of Southern Iran. The central focus of the opening shots of the Iraqi ground war against Iran in 1980 was the control of the flatlands. With control of these, armored and mechanized columns could flow with ease, leaving the Iranians the northern mountainous regions and marshes in the south past Basra. Another tactical objective for Saddam's General Staff was to push Iranian positions away from artillery range of Iraqi cities. Iraq's initial assault pushed 10-30 kilometers

	Iraq	Iran
Population Ratio	1	to 3
Troops	242,000	514,000
Reserves	250,000	400,000
Strategic Depth	400 km	1,300 km
Coastline	100 km	1,500 km
Oil Potential	9.6 billion barrels*	23 billion barrels*
Oil Reserves	31 billion barrels	58 billion barrels
Gas Reserves	2.75 million cubic ft	490 million cubic ft
* per year		

Figure 4

east of the Shatt al-Arab banks. Saddam hoped to:

- * Topple the Khomeini regime;
- * Receive territorial recognition of Iraq's primacy over Qasr Shireen in the north and the Shatt al-Arab in the south; and
- * Demonstrate Iraq's supremacy over the Persian Gulf.

The war instead drew down into a stalemate and a static trench defense using 20th century weapons of war. Iran's immediate objectives were:

- * Quickly reconstitute its forces;
- * Break its political and military isolation to access weapons and parts from any source even if it was Israel; and
- * Galvanize and mobilize the massive Iranian population, an advantage Iran always enjoyed over Iraq.

No war simply involves two sides. The case of the Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1989 is no exception. Arab Sunni Muslim states saw it as a means of containing Persian Shiite ambitions. Israel saw it as a covert means of containing Iraq's Saddam Hussein who craved nuclear weapons, and saw Iraqi armor in support of Jordan in any future Arab-Israeli War as a threat. Israel also contended with Iraq's support of Palestinian rejectionist groups as an internal threat to Israel. Egypt saw the Iran-Iraq War as an opportunity to bolster its credentials as a moderate Arab power, and begin the rehabilitation of relations with the Arab League, damaged by Egypt's peace accords with Israel. Syria saw an opportunity to undermine a rival Baathist regime in Iraq. Iran's hard-line policies and irrational public statements were betrayed by desperation for American military spare parts, it used American hostages to negotiate a much needed infusion of arms.

Iran's mullahs turned the essence of the conflict into one of Persian nationalism and playing on the victimization imagery that is inherent within Shiite Islam. Its mandate became to rid the globe of oppressors of the earth starting with Saddam. Iraq could never win a drawn-out conflict with Iran, due to demographic factors and lack of strategic depth of major Iraqi cities to include Baghdad and Basra. The book breaks down the numbers why Iraq could not afford a drawn-out war with Iran (see Figure 4).

Syria, a Baathist competitor, all but sided with Iran when it closed down Iraq's oil pipeline that took Iraqi oil to Banyas, Syria and Beirut, Lebanon for shipment around the globe. This was a blow to

Iraq's ability to sustain a war of attrition with Iran. Desperate, Iraq explored pipelines through Saudi Arabia and the Red Sea or through Turkey.

Iran began amassing massive human wave assaults and withdrew formations along its border with the USSR, directing them against Iraq. By the summer of 1982, Saddam realized he could not have the ultimate victory he and his advisers deluded themselves could be achieved. In late June 1982, Saddam ordered the withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Iranian territory gained in 1980. This did nothing to change Khomeini's personal agenda and determination to continue the war. The Ayatollah's demands made it clear he did not want to seize any serious opportunity for peace in 1982 and would continue the war for another six and a half years. Among Khomeini's demands:

- * \$150 billion in compensation;

- * The removal of Saddam Hussein (regime change—the Iranian terms for regime change were more stringent than what the United States demanded on the eve of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Khomeini wanted the removal of Saddam and his entire cabinet of ministers); and

- * Permission to allow Iranian forces to traverse Iraq to engage in war against the Israelis in support of any wider Arab-Israeli War.

The terms dictated by Khomeini led Saddam to ask for United Nations peacekeepers in July 1982 along the Iran-Iraq border and to confirm that all Iraqi units have left Iran. Saddam wanted United Nations forces to enforce a cease-fire. Both Iran and the United Nations refused these proposals. That same month (July 1982), Iranian forces carried out Operation Ramadan, a massive assault on Basra. Although a military failure, the Iranian assault should have worried Saddam, for

Iranian military planners abandoned the futile attempt to attack through the marshes in favor of human wave assaults on key strategic objectives.

Conclusion

The balance of power between Iraq and Iran in the past and now rests upon Iraq joining a union of Arab Gulf States as a counter to Iran. For only through a common collective such as being part of the Ottoman Empire or support from Arab Gulf States during the Iran-Iraq War, can Iraq match and deter Tehran economically, demographically, militarily, and strategically. When Iraq became a quasi independent monarchy in 1921 and then a nepotistic dictatorship under the Baathists, it could never successfully counter Iran alone and particularly in any war of attrition.

Books by Arab authors on Iraq's political and military history along with those written by Persian authors in *Farsi* (the Persian language) need to be translated, assessed and understood by future American military planners. This allows American policymakers and military leaders the ability to enter the nuances, language and perceptions (right or wrong) that individuals both allies and adversaries from the region hold. Obscure titles in Arabic such as the one featured in this essay written 25 years ago by a recently graduated Lebanese university student are vital as the United States undertakes a long-term commitment to the challenges of the Middle East. Khalifa's book highlights the tribal, historical and sectarian issues that Iran faces, which include Kurds in the North, tribes of Arab origin in the south, and Sunnis Baluchis along the border with Pakistan. Web sites offer a revealing look into emerging and established separatist movements among these groups that threaten Iran's territorial integrity, it is vital

that the United States be cognizant of these groups which add instability to an already tense region. This instability is not helped by a reactionary Shiite fundamentalist government in Iran.

By liberating Iraq from Saddam Hussein, the coalition has broken centuries of Iraq's history in which cruel leaders have governed the region. In addition, its geographic location combined with its resources has made it the stage for numerous wars of great powers. The United States has for a single moment in Iraq's long history given the Iraqis the opportunity to break this cycle. In the end, it is up to the Iraqi people to seize the moment and defy centuries of history by evolving into the Arab world's first multicultural true democracy or regress back into the pattern of Iraqi history of being dominated by dictatorships and manipulated by regional powers. The men and women of the United States armed forces have done something truly extraordinary, provided the Iraqis a small window to break their historical cycle of violence and oppression. The success of Operation Iraqi Freedom is still debatable, but America has in the end succeeded in turning the tide of history long enough for the Iraqi people to make a choice. In the end, success or failure will be the result of the choice of Iraqi leaders and the Iraqi people.

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